

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001848

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10-04-12

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: President Kumaratunga's swipe at the PM sparks another cohabitation dustup

Refs: Colombo 1828, and previous

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) Summary: In a recent speech, President Kumaratunga accused Prime Minister Wickremesinghe of soliciting bribes years ago. The accusation has prompted another cohabitation dustup, with the PM's supporters responding with salvos of their own aimed at Kumaratunga. In a more muted fashion, Kumaratunga and her advisers are also hitting out at the GSL's peace initiative. The sum result of the latest fracas is that it probably strengthened the PM's determination to take steps to rein in Kumaratunga's powers. End Summary.

Kumaratunga Lashes Out at PM

2. (SBU) The cohabitation waters are riled again. In a September 29 speech given in the north-central city of Anuradhapura, President Kumaratunga lashed out at Prime Minister Wickremesinghe. In widely publicized comments, the president effectively accused Wickremesinghe of soliciting bribes when he was education minister in the late 1980's. Without providing any evidence, she asserted that the Wickremesinghe and his staff had demanded that she (Kumaratunga) pay 25,000 Rupees (roughly USD 260) in order to gain admittance for her son, Vimukthi, to Royal College, a well-known local high school. The president asserted that she would not pay the bribe and her son did not gain admittance.

3. (C) (((Note: The latest presidential version of why her son did not get into Royal College is a new one. In the past, she has asserted that Wickremesinghe had blackballed her son from getting into the prestigious school for political reasons. She did not mention the bribery charge. Whatever the truth is regarding her son's application to get into the school, it is apparent that whatever happened made a deep imprint on Kumaratunga, with many observers citing it as one of the key reasons she does not get along with the PM. End Note.)))

Dustup Ensues

4. (SBU) The accusation has led to another cohabitation dustup, with the PM's supporters harshly criticizing Kumaratunga. Commerce Minister Ravi Karunanayake, a bitter foe of Kumaratunga's, was quoted as stating: "We know the president attacks us (other ministers in the government) and we don't take those insults seriously, but we will not allow her to cast aspersions on the prime minister." Buddhist Welfare Minister W.J.M. Lokubandara stated: "We must understand that we cannot have cohabitation with the president under the present circumstances." According to press reports, the weekly cabinet chaired by the PM on October 2 also turned into a hotbed of anti-Kumaratunga invective. In obviously leaked reports, various ministers were cited as calling for Kumaratunga's immediate impeachment, among other things.

5. (C) The ferocity of the response to her accusation, including the generally negative press play it generated, put the president a bit on the defensive. Her staff asserted that she had been misquoted, but video feed of the speech showed her making the bribery claim. Her staff then took another tack -- Harim Peiris, one of the president's press spokesman, told us that "she was just joking." Be that as it may, the damage had been done, with many finding the president's remarks beyond the pale. Taranjit Sandhu, polchief at the Indian High Commission, told us that Kumaratunga's comments "had badly backfired. The PM is widely

respected and few people believe that he is corrupt. Most people took the president's remarks as another sign of her own instability."

Chipping away at the Peace Initiative

16. (SBU) In a more muted fashion (compared with her Anurahapura remarks in any case), the president and her advisers have also been criticizing the GSL's peace initiative. In the latest salvo, the president's office publicly issued a letter she had sent to the PM dated September 27 in which she expressed concern over two matters. First, she warned the PM not to take any rushed steps related to "high security zones" that might affect "national security." (Note: At the recent talks in Thailand, the two sides agreed to form a joint body to examine high security zones in the north and east, with the aim of allowing increased numbers of displaced persons to return to their point of origin.) Second, she asked to PM to look into press reports that the Tamil Tigers had held a large graduation ceremony for military cadets on September 19 in the Trincomalee area (see Reftel).

17. (C) In addition to the president's letter, Harim Peiris spoke to the press regarding the peace process, stating that the Tamil Tigers needed to be disarmed before the GSL agreed to the formation of an interim administration for the north and east. Explaining his stance, he was quoted as commenting, "A heavily armed LTTE taking over government-controlled areas is untenable." (Note: It is widely expected that the Tigers would dominate any interim administration formed for the north and east.) Reacting to Peiris' comments, Jehan Perera, the head of a local think-tank, told us that the disarming of the Tigers could not even be considered at this point as the group would not even hear of it. To make such a demand, "could end the peace process," Perera averred.

Comment

18. (C) For his part, the PM did not publicly comment on the president's accusation, although he was said to be infuriated in private. The sum result of the latest fracas is that it probably strengthened the PM's determination to take steps to rein in Kumaratunga's powers. Already, the PM is moving a bill in Parliament meant to constrain the president's power to call new elections. It is not clear whether the bill has the needed support, but the latest outburst by Kumaratunga probably helped the PM's cause.

19. (C) In terms of the latest soundings re the peace process, the president seems to be trying to appear as skeptical and hard-line toward the Tigers as possible in order to accuse the GSL of naivete if the process is somehow derailed. She seems a bit tentative on the subject, however, perhaps because she does not want to alienate a public which strongly supports the GSL's peace initiative at this time. End Comment.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS